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HAVE WE AUTHENTIC PORTRAITS OF ST. PAUL?

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MANY able Christian writers now agree that both Peter and Paul lived for a time and suffered martyrdom at Rome, where they were known and revered, not alone by the poor, but by many of the rich and powerful of the Roman citizens who accepted their teachings.

At no place or time in the world were portraits of every kind so common as at Rome during the period about the beginning of the Christian era, a century before, and somewhat longer afterwards. From the gods they descended through the rulers and distinguished persons to commoners of every rank, and even artisans, like shoemakers, had their portraits cut upon their tombs. From the earliest times the catacombs were decorated with real or fanciful portraits of apostles, martyrs, and biblical personages. There was no persecution until that of Nero, so that there could have been no fear to prevent some of the many artists of Rome making portraits of Peter and Paul for their friends. That we have none known to have been taken from life is no more remarkable than that we have none of the original manuscripts of the books of the New Testament.



FIG. 1.—REPOUSSE WORK OF THE SECOND CENTURY.

A modern writer says of these what would be equally applicable to such portraits: "It does not appear that any special care was taken in the first age to preserve the books of the New Testament from injuries of time, or to insure perfect accuracy of transcription. . . . The original copies seem to have soon perished; and we may perhaps see in this a providential provision against that spirit of superstition which in earlier times converted the symbols of God's redemption into objects of idolatry." That they did exist no one questions.



FIG. 2.—MOSAIC OF THE FOURTH CENTURY.

Most of the methods of portraiture now in use were in use then. In sculpture we have extant of that period statues, busts, and reliefs. A very noteworthy illustration of our subject, as showing that the Christians were portrayed in caricature, was that human figure with an ass's head, on the cross, supposed to represent the Christ, scratched in the fresh plaster on the wall of a room in the palace of the Cæsars in the first century, A. D., and recently found. In color we have mosaics, frescoes, and among these last so many representing paintings framed and hung on the walls of rooms, that doubtless easel paintings were not uncommon at an early day; and from about the middle of the second century come the Græco-Roman portraits, painted on wood panels found in the cemetery at Fayûm, in Egypt. Whatever was done at this date had undoubtedly been much better done at

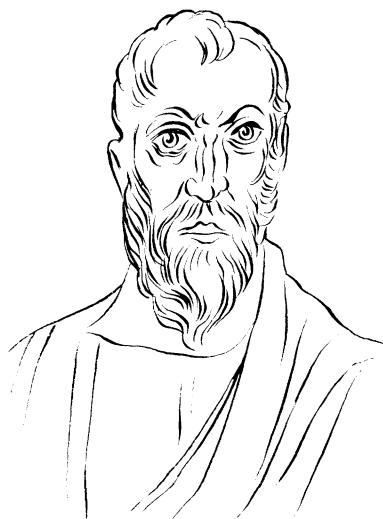


FIG. 3.—MOSAIC AT ROME, 526-530 A. D.

an earlier time, so we can consider their workmanship a step in the descent from the heights of art which had been passed several hundred years before. The constant succession of persecutions up to the fourth century would probably have destroyed all but some small portraits easily carried and hidden, which have since disappeared.

Perhaps the best proof that portraits of the apostles once existed is the succession of portraits extant which have been made from

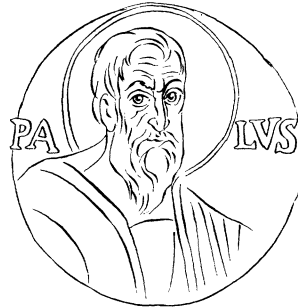


FIG. 4.—MOSAIC FROM RAVENNA, 547 A. D.



FIG. 5.—MOSAIC AT ROME, 821 A. D.

time to time since their death, in different places, all of them of the same general type, notwithstanding the depths to which art sank during the Middle Ages. For illustration I have selected from photographs and prints a few that happened to be at hand.

The first (Fig. 1) is a

relief in repoussé work of the second century, found in the catacombs of Domatella. My reproduction is from a cut in one of R. Lanciani's works. According to records quoted by him Flavia Domatella, for whom the catacombs were named, and who was a Christian martyr, was a niece of



FIG. 6.—MOSAIC OF THE TENTH CENTURY.

Vespasian (68 A. D.) and of Domitian (81 A. D.), so that this portrait was probably deposited there during the lifetime of many who knew Paul personally. The house of Pudens, the friend of Paul (2 Tim. 4 : 21),



FIG. 7.—WOOD PAINTING, GREEK WORK OF THE ELEVENTH CENTURY, OR PERHAPS EARLIER.

used probably as a meeting place by the earliest Christians, was certainly an authorized place of worship as early as 150 A. D. and grew into one of the most revered and highly ornamented churches in Rome under the name San Pudentiana. From a photograph of the very fine mosaic still existing in the apse the second illustration (Fig. 2) is taken. It has been retouched, and there has been much discussion as to its age, but it seems to be safe to assign it to the fourth century. The pagan temple

made over into a Christian church and dedicated to SS. Cosmo and Damian gives us the next portrait (Fig. 3), a mosaic made A. D. 526–530.

The seat of government of the Western Roman Empire was moved from Rome to Ravenna during the reign of Honorius, and under him and his successors the latter city was filled with handsome churches, among them one dedicated to San Vitale, which was finished in the year A. D. 547. Among its decorations was the mosaic medallion of St. Paul (Fig. 4) reproduced here.

In the church built on the site of the house and to the memory of that charming St. Cecilia is another mosaic of St. Paul (Fig. 5), represented, as is so often the case, with

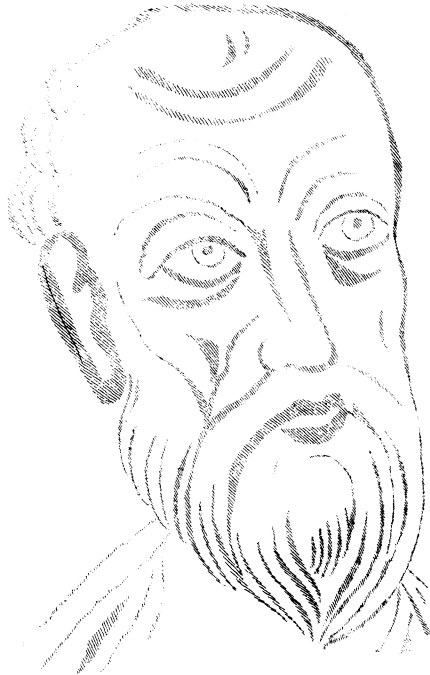


FIG. 8.—FRESCO OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

St. Peter supporting Christ. This portrait was made about A. D. 821. In Fig. 6 we have St. Paul again with St. Peter and Christ, in a mosaic which once adorned the tomb of Otho II, in the old church of St. Peter's at Rome, a work of the last half of the tenth century. The next illustration (Fig. 7) is a head of St. Paul of the Byzantine type from an engraving in D'Agincourt's collection of a painting on wood brought to Rome from Greece about the eleventh century, its actual date unknown. The whole painting represents the two apostles with Christ.

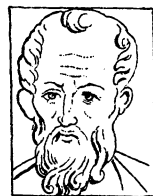


FIG. 9.—FROM A GREEK MS. Fifteenth Century.



FIG. 10.—FRESCO BY MASACCIO, FLORENCE, FIFTEENTH CENTURY.

It would make more probable the theory that these faces were copies from paintings of St. Paul taken from life if there were space to give illustrations of the rude artistic work of dates contemporary with these, which was very far from following nature.

Two of the more modern pictures of Paul may be given: a fresco of the thirteenth century (Fig. 8) in the chapel of St. Sylvester at Rome, and a Greek head (Fig. 9) from a manuscript of the Acts of the Apostles which once belonged to the Queen of Cyprus, and was given by her to Pope Innocent VIII, executed in the fifteenth century or earlier. There is also a group (Fig. 10) by Masaccio, whose frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel at Florence, studied by all those who followed him and copied by even Raphael, were painted A. D. 1420-1430.

These bring us to a time when portrait painting was again common, and to a series of pictures from which we derive our own ideas for biblical illustrations.

What probability is there, then, that these pictures represent approximately Paul's personal appearance? They seem to be of a common type, and are in accord with the second-century tradition that he was bald-headed, with meeting eyebrows, a prominent nose, and a long, rather thin beard. But the tradition and the pictures can hardly be considered independent witnesses. The question must be left open. There is some probability that they give us an idea of Paul's looks, though this is not certain enough to build upon.